



Frequently Asked Questions

HEPATITIS C VIRUS (HCV)

What is HEPATITIS C?

Hepatitis C is a liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV) which is found in the blood of persons who have the disease. HCV is spread by contact with the blood of an infected person.

Who gets Hepatitis C?

Persons at highest risk for the HCV infection include:

- people who ever injected illegal drugs and shared needles or equipment, including those who injected once many years ago;
- people who have had blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1992, when sensitive tests for HCV were introduced for blood screening; and
- people who received clotting factors made before 1987.

Other persons at risk for hepatitis C include:

- long-term kidney dialysis patients;
- people who snort cocaine and use shared drug equipment;
- people with high-risk sexual behavior, multiple partners, and are infected with a sexually transmitted disease;
- people who share toothbrushes, razors and diabetes lancets with family member or friends who are HCV-infected;
- people who receive a tattoo or body piercing in prison;
- infants born to HCV-infected mothers; and
- healthcare workers who are exposed to a needle stick from an infected HCV patient.

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood or bodily fluids containing the virus of an infected person enters the body of a person not infected. Infection can occur when diabetes lancets, toothbrushes, razors, needles and other drug “works” are shared. Sexual transmission can occur especially when blood is present, but is found to be low in long-term, monogamous (one long-term partner) relationships. There is no evidence that the virus is spread through casual contact such as hugging, shaking hands, sharing food, or sharing glasses or eating utensils. HCV is not spread by coughing, sneezing or breastfeeding.

Contact the Hepatitis Program for more information: (302) 744-1050

Revised: 04/2007

Page 1 of 2



Frequently Asked Questions

What are the symptoms of infection?

Approximately 20 percent of those exposed to HCV develop symptoms such as jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes), fatigue, dark-colored urine, stomach pain, loss of appetite and nausea. The other approximate 80 percent show no signs of illness and it can be 10-15 years before they are diagnosed with HCV. After the initial infection, 15-20 percent will recover and clear the virus, but the majority (75-85 percent) will become chronically infected. Approximately 70 percent of persons chronically infected will develop liver disease that can result in liver cancer and death. HCV is the number one reason for liver transplants.

When and how long is a person able to spread the hepatitis C virus?

A person who tests positive for HCV should be considered potentially contagious.

What is the treatment for HCV?

Anti-Viral drugs are licensed for treatment of persons with HCV. Combination drug therapy, using pegylated interferon and ribavirin, can rid the virus of up to 50 percent of the people infected with genotype 1, the most common type in the United States, and 80 percent of the people with 2 or 3. It is important to find a physician who is an expert in treating HCV.

How can persons with HCV reduce their risk of chronic liver disease?

Persons with HCV should not drink alcohol. They should discuss their condition with their physician before taking any new medications, over-the-counter medications and herbal medications; and prior to receiving hepatitis A and B vaccines.

How can the spread of HCV be prevented?

Prevent the spread of HCV by practicing these healthy behaviors:

- Do not shoot drugs. If you do, stop and get into a treatment program. If you cannot stop, NEVER share needles, syringes, water or "works", and get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B.
- Do not share needles if you are injecting steroids.
- Do not share personal items such as razors, lancets and toothbrushes because they might have blood on them.
- Weigh the risk of getting a tattoo or body piercing. You might become infected if the artist or piercer does not follow good health practices such as using new needles and ink pots for each client.

For more information:

Visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/hepatitis/c.

Contact the Hepatitis Program for more information: (302) 744-1050

Revised: 04/2007

Page 2 of 2

Doc. # 35-05-20/07/04/06